

Holly Wagner, WCCO

The families of 12 Minnesota soldiers are saying their goodbyes as their loved ones prepare to go to Afghanistan.

The National Guard is deploying the soldiers as part of its ongoing partnership with the Croatian Armed Forces to train and mentor the Afghan Army.

The soldiers are all men, and will be replacing another unit with soldiers from Minnesota.

A deployment ceremony was held Thursday morning at the National Guard Armory in St. Paul. Many of the soldiers were accompanied by their family members.

Gov. Tim Pawlenty, first lady Mary Pawlenty, and Rep. Betty McCollum each addressed the troops and wished them well.

The soldiers will spend the next couple of months training and then in January the unit will be working in Afghanistan until fall of 2011.

Paul Harper is a former Marine who served in the Gulf War, Bosnia, and Iraq. This will be his fourth deployment. He and his wife Ivette Harper live in Fridley.

"It's hard, it's hard. I know he's doing the right thing for the country ... but it's hard for us," said Ivette Harper. "The fourth time, it makes you think how many more you'll do."

Paul Harper says he's already thinking about this time next year.

"When will I be coming home? You do what you have to do," he said.

When Harper's unit arrives in Afghanistan, they will replace another National Guard unit from Minnesota which is expected to return home in late January.